

Back Again, Back Again: A Feast, A Festival, Part 2

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode six: A Feast, a Festival, part two.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyas: *There's to be a festival tonight,* Rhia said, the day after Cassian told me about the prophecy.

I was staring at a piece of parchment Cassian had left on my pillow after dinner the night before, along with a tiny bouquet of wildflowers from the tree, tied with a piece of twine. The paper had the prophecy written on it -- in Rhysean, line by line, with the English below it, like Rhysean No-Fear Shakespeare. *What for?* I asked, tracing over the neat letters with an absent finger.

Rhia looked to the parchment and frowned. *For you,* she replied, because this means it's begun.

Oh? Was my response, even though my chest did a nervous little ache at the words *for you*.

We spent the day getting ready. Rhia taught me pleasantries in Rhysean -- meaningless *Hello's, how are you's.* *The weather is nice.* *It is: Sunny, rainy, cloudy, warm.* And less meaningless, too, meant to confirm, meant to reassure: *I am the Girl That Starts It. Lion Hair. Golden child. I'm from far away. My sword is from the tree. I am here to help the kings.*

A knock came at the door, as the day was growing long. A dress, wrapped in brown paper and tied with a sand-colored ribbon, was handed to Rhia and deposited in front of me, and we both held our breath as we unwrapped it.

For, god, it was gorgeous. The dress was a soft gold, elaborate beading falling along the bodice and down, down, until as we pulled it out it became clear it wasn't so much a dress as a jumpsuit, with wide legs mimicking a skirt -- but with added mobility -- and a wide deep-blue sash tied at the waist in a bow. The sleeves were made of a fine white cotton mesh, almost transparent, and woven along them were the flowers I was beginning to know so well -- lily-of-the-valley, peonies, that stretched along the sleeves and into the high neckline, made of the same fine mesh, fine embroidery.

Rhia grinned as I sat, flummoxed, open-mouthed and gaping. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever touched.

Do you like it? She asked finally.

God, yes. I managed. *Gods, yes.*

A thousand tiny buttons made up the back, and lacking incredibly dexterous fingers, Rhia helped me into it, my fingers fumbling the buttons as hers trailed behind, fixing my mistakes. As I turned, finally facing the mirror, my breath caught. I looked -- powerful.

I looked like I could change the world.

Where's yours? I finally said, half-joking, but her face fell for half a second before she caught herself and grinned again.

I'll be right here, when you get back. She said by way of response. *You're Cassian's responsibility tonight.*

Are you sure? I said, prying, even though we both knew this wasn't her decision to make. And her eyes told me as much --

even if she didn't use the words to say it -- *it's fine. Don't make trouble.*

A knock on the door again -- this time, less harried, more self-assured. Rhia ran over and pulled the door wide -- and Cassian stepped in.

For as much as he stared at me, those first five breaths of silence, I stared back -- for he cleaned up nicely, even if this was more *princeling* than the day before. His suit, the inverse of mine, was deep-blue with a soft golden trim, like the fashion of his parents the day I came, though this was more -- formal? And -- fit... to him, his power or charisma or -- regality -- making up the very fabric, the sort of aura YA books raved about. Another circlet -- this one slightly fancier than the, you know, casual daytime circlet of yesterday sat in his hair, the same gold as the accents on his suit.

You look like the Eligida, he finally said, hands held behind him.

You look like a king, I shot back, and he grinned crookedly.

Oh -- he stuttered, speaking of -- and from behind his back he pulled a crown of golden laurels, tiny white flowers laced in-between the branches. As he held it out, I stepped towards him. Cassian hesitated before setting it on my head, tilting it just slightly so it matched his.

There, he said. *Now you look like the Eligida.* One hand fluttered by my hair -- wild and red and free, no braids or pins pulling it back, and he grinned. *I'm glad you left it down.*

Thank you, I said, reaching my hand up and letting it brush over the crown, *for everything.*

He nodded to Rhia. *Thank you,* he said, then held out a hand to me. *Are you ready?*

No, I said, half-joking to try and quell my anxiety. Yes, I quickly corrected, seeing his frown and not wanting to have to explain my poor attempt at humor.

I could hear the noise of the gathered people before we even made it to the room. Music and laughter and all the things that made a party scene in a period piece sounded like they came from the other side of the door, and Cassian and I were the latecomers, him, sure and certain, me, with no idea who I was meant to be once I made it through. Did they want magic? I hadn't figured out how to do much beyond have my sword glow as I held it. The rest of it -- as much as I could feel it in my veins, in my blood -- was... inaccessible. Buried somewhere I didn't know how to access.

I hadn't even thought about being asked to do magic -- to perform -- until the moment we stood outside of the doors. I wanted to throw up.

Cassian raised his chin and squared his shoulders. I copied him, trying to seem like I was meant to take up space in the world.

The doors swung open, and side-by-side, we stormed in -- the leader and the Girl That Started It All.

The prince and the Vatakina Eligida.

The soldier and king, right out of the stories old.

No one announced us, like in period pieces, but the room swayed and stopped, three breaths held, as we stepped inside. I kept my chin raised high, and I took Cassian's hand when he offered it, grounding myself under the stares of a thousand people. And it was quite a gesture I'm sure, too -- us against the world.

He smiled, and nodded, and the people went back to their party. Stay with me, he said, not letting my hand go. I don't want to have to do this without you.

Funny, I murmured. I was thinking the same thing.

Conversation swirled around me in whirlpools I couldn't dream of understanding. Cassian ran translation, the two of us still linked together, as he conversed with the people around me and offered me lines of dialogue as I stumbled my way through the phrases I knew as I was introduced, over and over, to the people we met. Royals with hair stacked high or braided away or left free, in suits like mine or suits like Cassian's, in dresses and colors of every sort -- but -- gold. We were the only ones in gold.

Seanoc vatakina eligida. Tenoc gladicus de Enarbol.

Gratinoc. Gratinoc. Gratinoc.

The world was impossibly complicated and I understood none of it. The people laughed at my incomprehension and smiled like I was a pet or looked to me like I was a god, some old forgotten legend come back at the moment of chaos for a deux ex machina ending. Cassian talked and didn't let go of my hand, kept me centered as the night wore on and I became more and more aware of the grinding in my blood as my sword sat upstairs and I was not with it. I found myself in front of the midnight queen and pale king and kneeled, this time, before someone could knock my knees out from under me, and the queen looked to Cassian and said, in English -- *she learns, then*. He shot her a look as she swept away, as she called over her shoulder in English that there would be more to learn than that.

The king, somewhere between sheepish and lazed, told me vaguely more of promises of training for battle and training for language, and as Cassian pulled me away as politely as he could, he promised that when the day came for us to pull the building tyrant down I would be ready.

I told him I'd never held a real sword before I came here. He told me that he would make sure I could.

The dark sky of the glass dome and the thousands and thousands of candles that scattered across the room gave everything an odd feverish glow that colored the room somewhere between orange and yellow. Dancers made their way to the floor and an odd sort of reel began as they spun off, Regency-style, into different arrangements to meet partners and retreat and start again. Cassian tried to take me with him, tugging me towards the floor, but I dug my feet in and begged him not to -- not knowing a single one of the dance steps that they performed -- so we danced, quietly, on the side of the room, a half-joking sway back and forth to pretend we were down there with the rest of them.

I realized how very, very bi I was. And that sometimes boys were made of starlight, too.

I said nothing of this to Cassian, but kept it as a thought, somewhere deep inside me, to unravel another day.

After enough convincing, he swapped crowns with me, and we went for another circle around the room: him now with flowers and me now a pretend-prince, us pretending not to notice the looks it garnered as Cassian made his whirlwind translations back and forth and I stumbled my way through my thanks and reassurances, *gratinoc, gratinoc, seanoc vatakina eligida*.

How do you describe an odd night, the conversation of which you can hardly remember? Sure, you remember the stares and the dancing, the crown-swapping and the bowing, but when the conversation around you means nothing, the judgments people draw over the teenage girl who's meant to save them get lost. The anxiety gets lost -- a lot of the emotion gets lost, becoming this haze of color and seven specific thoughts.

I remember the ache for my sword, though. Clear as anything. I remember Cassian walking me back to my room, so dark and late it was almost light -- gloaming, nine hours too late --

and I remember him leaning against the doorway as I faced him, inside, reluctantly swapping back the crown I'd managed to hold on to for most of the evening.

I remember his good-night. And I remember falling asleep with my sword, sheathed across my chest like a warrior entombed.

Rhia woke me up the next morning. There was a note from Cassain, slid under my door: *Enarbol courtyard. As soon as you're awake. Bring the sword.*

He was true to his word, as he tried to be in all things. *You'll learn how to carry that sword*, he'd said, and the time had come to begin.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.